

**Zha, Changguo** 查昌國, *A Study of the Pre-Qin Concepts of “Piety” and “Brotherhood”— And Enquiry of Han and Song Confucianism* 先秦「孝」、「友」觀念研究—兼漢宋儒學探索  
Hefei 合肥: Anhui University Press 安徽大學出版社, 2006, 233 pages

**TANG Siufu**

Published online: 14 October 2012

© The Author(s) 2012. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

This book is a collection of twelve essays written by the author over a period of thirteen years, from 1988 to 2001. As the title suggests, the bulk of the essays, seven to be exact, investigate the pre-Qin understanding of piety (*xiao* 孝) and brotherhood (*you* 友). In particular the author argues against the common understanding that, from the early Zhou dynasty, “*xiao*” referred to filial piety to blood parents, and “*you*” as a concept was relatively independent of other relationship concepts like “*xiao*” in the same period. Instead the author suggests that “*xiao*” as filial piety and “*you*” as friendship are the results of Confucius’s innovation and its later elaboration by other early Confucians like Mencius and Xunzi. There are in addition two essays on early Confucianism, one a re-interpretation of the contentious term “*keji* 克己” (overcoming oneself or the self being capable) in the *Analects*, and the other a comparative study of Xunzi and Hegel’s understanding of human nature. The book then follows with one essay on Han Confucianism, which studies the contribution of Liu Xiang 劉向, and another on Song Confucianism, which discusses the incorporation of Chan Buddhism by Neo-Confucianism. The book concludes with an essay on Hegel’s concept of badness.

The author indicates in the introduction that although there have been continuous calls for the revival of Confucianism, in reality the efforts in doing so have been seriously hampered by the negative preconceptions of Confucianism among the general public. In his opinion such negative preconceptions can only be removed by a serious and meticulous study of Confucian canons and the development of Confucian tradition in history. The author particularly calls for a restoration of the “historical consciousness” of Chinese culture. I believe that it is with such a background understanding that the author writes the essays of the book.

---

TANG Siufu (✉)

School of Chinese, The University of Hong Kong, Run Run Shaw Tower, Centennial Campus,  
Pokfulam, Hong Kong  
e-mail: tangsf@hku.hk

The seven essays on piety and brotherhood demonstrate especially well the close attention paid to the original texts and an awareness of the historical development of cultural ideas. The first two essays of the book both investigate the understanding of piety in the Western Zhou dynasty. With occasional repetition, the two essays argue from different perspectives against the idea that “*xiao*” in the Western Zhou meant filial piety and was a virtue for the relationship between parents and sons. Drawing on evidence from inscribed texts on bronze vessels and various original texts such as the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Erya* 爾雅, the *Chronicle of Zuo* (*Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan* 春秋左傳), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經), the two essays argue convincingly that “*xiao*” in the Western Zhou referred to piety to deceased ancestors and was a virtue especially for kings and lords. It was not until the Spring and Autumn period that “*xiao*” became applicable to living fathers, as the author suggests in the third essay. However, in this period the living fathers to whom piety was practised were almost always the reigning lords. The author points out that piety in the Spring and Autumn period continued to be a political rather than a moral concept and was mainly used to maintain political stability. The innovation came with Confucius. The author suggests in the fourth essay that it was Confucius who first vigorously promoted piety as a personal virtue, which consisted in everyone paying respect to his or her living or deceased parents. The major objective of piety was no longer political stability but moral cultivation, in particular the heart/mind’s feeling at ease (*xinan* 心安). The author further proclaims that Confucius’s new conception of piety shattered the Western Zhou’s patriarchal feudalism and helped the establishment of independent families and consequently territorial states. The author heavily relies on Lewis Henry Morgan’s analysis of social evolution and the distinction between the kinship society and the territorial state in *Ancient Society*. It is certainly debatable whether and to what extent Morgan’s analysis applies to ancient China. Nonetheless the author should be applauded for applying the analysis of social evolution to the understanding of Confucianism, thereby extending the grounds for critical reflection. Less laudable is the author’s curious claim that Confucius’s advocacy of filial piety aims not at the promotion of human relationships and morality but at the independence of families from clanship (97). It is plausible that Confucius’s recommendation of filial piety and other personal virtues did help shake up the patriarchal feudalism of the Western Zhou. However, it is less convincing that Confucius consciously aimed to overthrow the Western Zhou’s clanship system, since he explicitly expressed his admiration of the Zhou’s ritual culture in the *Analects* (3.14). The author should at least provide more textual evidence for such a controversial claim. On the other hand, while the author does acknowledge the innovative and humanitarian spirit of Confucius’s understanding of filial piety (84), he does not elaborate further. Instead he makes the above-mentioned claim that Confucius does not take human relationships and morality as his utmost pursuit. In a similar vein, the author makes the interesting point that the concept of “piety” is receptive to creative reinterpretations and consequently is capable of renovation with time (61) but follows with no further articulation. It is regrettable that such an important aspect of “piety” does not receive further examination. If such neglect is understandable given the author’s self-avowed aim in historical explanation, the less-than-accurate portrayal of Confucian conception of filial piety should receive harsher criticism. The author suggests at various places that

according to the Confucian conception of filial piety parents enjoy a supreme position, and sons must not object even when parents act immorally (20, 74, 81). Confucianism does propose that sons must not openly confront parents, yet such a recommendation is to preserve love between parents and sons, not to acquiesce in immorality. In the *Xunzi* it is said that real filial piety amounts to following righteousness and not the father, and if parents' orders are morally wrong then sons must not obey such orders (Book 29). Similarly the *Classic of Filial Piety* explicitly states that Filial piety never amounts to simple obedience and records that if the father acts against righteousness, the son must remonstrate with him. It is unfortunate that the author gives a careless portrayal of the Confucian conception of filial piety, for this unavoidably jeopardizes his efforts to remove the conservative image of Confucianism.

The two essays on "brotherhood" trace the three-stage development of the concept in early China. The author points out that while in the Western Zhou "piety" governed the relationship with deceased ancestors, "brotherhood" in the same period was applied to human relationships in the living world (129). Thus "brotherhood" governed not only the relationship between elder and younger brother, but also the relationship between lord and subject, as well as that of living father and living son. This was the case because of the kinship politics of the Western Zhou, and just like "piety," "brotherhood" in the period was used to maintain political stability. Beginning with Confucius, "brotherhood" was freed from kinship politics and applied to the fellowship of the scholar-officials (*shi* 士). Confucianism of the time also advocated that the ideal relationship of lord and subject should be modelled on "brotherhood" and be equal friendship, suggests the author. Only in the late Warring States period did the legalist HAN Feizhi criticize the application of "brotherhood" to the relationship between lord and subject and consequently the concept was severed from politics. The author has served Confucianism well by exposing the rich contents of the Confucian understanding of "brotherhood." In particular the author is right to highlight the spirit of equality and the emphasis of personal integrity of the concept (138). It is conceivable that with further articulation the Confucian conception of "brotherhood" has potential to be the foundation of civil society for modern China. The last essay of the group gives an account of the Mohist conception of "piety." The author points out that Mohism de-emphasizes the link of filial piety to one's own parents and, as a consequence, attempts to shaken the independence of family and the individuality of people. In such a way Mohism acted against the intellectual current of the times. This essay complements well the major argument of the author that early Confucianism was a progressive and evolutionary force.

The essay on LIU Xiang illustrates Liu's contribution in extending the intellectual territory of Confucianism. The author suggests the Liu pioneers in advocating two ideas. First, Confucius lays the foundation for all other schools. Second, all other schools represent the further development of the Confucian Classics. These two ideas of Liu blur the distinction between Confucianism and other schools and provide the justification for enriching Confucianism with ideas from other schools. The author further points out that indeed Liu attempts to combine Confucianism with the thought of other schools in his later works. In these later works Liu also exhibits the flexibility of Confucianism as well as its ability in accommodating different circumstances. Although the explicit target of the essay is Liu's contribution to Confucianism, in my opinion the author's real intention is in hinting at the contemporary mission of

Confucianism, which is to change with circumstances and incorporate ideas from other sources. The essay on Song Confucianism serves a similar function. The author argues that Song Confucians incorporate quite a few Chan Buddhist ideas into their articulation of Mencius's thought on heart/mind and human nature. In particular, Song Confucians borrow the metaphysics of Chan Buddhism to supply an ontological foundation for Confucian morality. In the essay the author has been careless in attributing to Mencius some terms which actually do not appear in the *Mencius*. Examples are “*xing ji shan* 性即善 (nature equals to goodness)” and “*renxing ben shan* 人性本善 (human nature is originally good)” (214, 215). However, these minor defects do not hamper the essay in providing a concrete example of the enrichment of Confucianism by ideas from external sources.

The author himself attempts to incorporate Western ideas through the two essays on Hegel. The last essay of the book is an introduction to Hegel's understanding of “badness” and its positive contribution to self-transcendence and moral improvement. The essay on the comparative study of Hegel and Xunzi uses Hegel's thought to further articulate Xunzi's negative conception of human nature. The author suggests that although Xunzi's emphasis of the “Way of the King” (*wangdao* 王道) provides important resources of moral criticism against the authoritarian rule, Xunzi's negative conception of human beings and his over-reliance on the ruler tend toward dictatorship and are contrary to the spirit of democracy. It is certainly debatable whether the author gives a fair interpretation of Xunzi; nonetheless the author's comments on dictatorship and democracy show again his deep concern with the contemporary relevance of Confucianism.

Lastly, there is an essay on the meaning of the term “*keji*” in the *Analects*. The author dismisses the repressive aspect of the term and insists that it connotes a positive image of the self being capable of practicing rituals. This position is contentious but unsurprising as it accords with the central theme of the book, which is to promote a positive image of Confucianism congenial to the contemporary development of China. I shall leave the details of the textual analysis to the readers to explore. The essay, just like the rest of the book, is sure to provide insightful stimulation.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits any use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.